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THE LATE PROFESSOR A. B. DAVIDSON, D.D., LL.D.

II.¹⁶

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III. DAVIDSON AS A TEACHER.

I NOW turn to the more easy task of some recollection and appreciation of his powers as a teacher. The generation of students to which I belonged reached Dr. Davidson's class-room before the crisis of the great controversy—that test which, though he took no public part in it, revealed to Scotland that he was the man who was doing more than any other to change her theological temper. Like the older men, therefore, we also knew him before the broader—it could not be a richer or a fonder—fame, which the Robertson Smith case brought him, had gathered round his figure. What was it, if I may attempt to answer a question beyond my ability, that we found in himself?

I have said that his power as a teacher was the bed-rock on which all the rest of his great reputation was founded. Certainly—apart from the tradition of his personal spell which had penetrated our undergraduate world—that was the first thing we felt. To pass into Dr. Davidson's class-room was to feel oneself on a floor of absolute security. The instinct of this awoke in us from the first, and every week confirmed it. We were in the care not only of a very keen intellect, but of one which was thoroughly master of its subject. Moreover, we felt its patience; its patience with everything but slovenliness. Dr. Davidson had to teach us the rudiments of the language. This was half his work with us; and the fact that he, now the leading authority in his subject, set himself to our instruction in the details of grammar and syntax, enhanced our grateful confidence to the pitch of enthusiasm. He did not betray to his students any sense of

¹⁶ Concluded from the BIBLICAL WORLD for September, 1902, pp. 167-77.

sacrifice in doing this; but in later years he said more than once that it was a pity that a professor should have to occupy one of the two short sessions given to the Old Testament in New College with preliminaries to his real work of teaching the criticism and theology of the larger half of the church's Scriptures.

The sense of security which these things imparted was, if possible, further confirmed by the impression of Dr. Davidson's disinterestedness. As Dr. John Watson has justly said, he was "a scholar, without any regard to popularity and worldly aims"—and, one might add, merely ecclesiastical issues—"cleared from unreality and affectation—a loyal and undivided servant of learning."

The next item in this bare list of what we got from our master was the gift of historical vision. The prophets whom we studied with him had been to us but figures speaking in vacancy. Amos at Bethel, Hosea amid the rich scenery and thronging life of northern Israel, Isaiah of Jerusalem, sounded to us—what another was, but what they in reality certainly were not—voices *crying in the wilderness*. He changed all that. He waved his wand, and their world rose about them. He waved his wand—I choose the words. It was a magical change. By no purple painting did he kindle our imagination. One morning—I at least date from that day my awakening to the reality of the prophets—he said: "The prophet always spoke first to his own time." They had "times," then! From the illimitable futures over which, as we had been taught, the prophet's word roved in search of its vague end—from the interminable doctrinal controversies about the fulfilment of prophecy—our thoughts were drawn in to a definite bit of real life. We saw a man with a message to the men about him. These sprang up alive, eager, impassioned; and the whole tragedy of *one* at strife for God with his contemporaries stood out before us. There was no recapitulation of archæology, or history, or geography. Davidson created the prophet's world out of the prophet's soul. By a word, and sometimes by a still more significant gesture, he showed us what the prophet's eyes saw and what the prophet's heart felt round about himself, as he stood alone

with God's word in him, kindling every sense that he had, of body or of mind, to a glowing purity of vision. Of course, we were driven to read all we could find on the historical conditions of the periods in question. There was very much less than there is now. We had Strachey's *Jewish History and Politics*,¹⁷ for its time a most useful book; and, above all, we had Ewald's *History of Israel*, the English translation of the prophetic period of which had just appeared. But, even from Ewald, we always came back to our own master. To our minds he, more clearly than any other, looked out of the prophet's eyes, and saw, not a historical reconstruction of the times, but just what the prophet saw, and what was needed to make us realize the prophet's message as an immediate word from God to the men of his own day. We remember best two lectures: one on Joel, whom Davidson at that time, with most critics, assigned to the eighth century, and one on Amos.¹⁸ He contrasted the town and the country prophet. But this contrast was only the ground on which living men spoke to living men of the living God. It is very difficult to understand how this method of interpretation (now generally adopted), of expounding first of all what a prophet meant for his own day, can be conceived by anybody (as it sometimes is conceived) to be destructive of the ultimate religious worth of prophecy, or as rendering us incapable of feeling that those ancient voices spake also to ourselves *on whom the ends of the world have come*. For, under Davidson, we felt ourselves beside those to whom the prophet spoke. We were they. *Our* consciences were stirred, *our* faith was fed, *our* day was explained to us. Davidson stimulated our personal religion and inspired us to become preachers.

All this is on the line of the statement made previously, that Davidson's interest in the Old Testament was engrossed by its great personalities. It was from inside these that he surveyed and used the history. This was not for lack of expertness in other departments of Old Testament science. As everybody

¹⁷ The second edition had recently been published.

¹⁸ These lectures had already been published in *The Family Treasury*. They were first delivered in 1863.

knows, his mastery of the text and of its criticism was perfect.¹⁹ His reviews, in the *Theological Review*, of all manner of books upon Semitic origins, episodes of Jewish history, the influence on Israel of other nations, Hebrew philology, and phases of Jewish thought, show that he kept abreast of the rapid increase of Old Testament literature. What is less known is his familiarity with archæology. Yet he has strewn proof of this along almost all his career, from his article in the *British and Foreign Evangelical Review* for 1871 on the Moabite stone and the work of the Palestine Exploration Fund in Jerusalem, to his Ezekiel. A few years ago I had occasion to discuss with him the book of Nehemiah on the topography of Jerusalem, and I was astonished at his mastery of the intricate data.²⁰ On all such subjects—historical, archæological, geographical—he could have lectured as fully as many specialists. But he used only so much of his knowledge as was necessary to illustrate the experience or the message of the individual souls, the interpretation of whom excited his highest powers. As so many of his students have lately testified, his lectures on these were fascinating. We laid down our pens and ceased taking notes, to follow, with breathless interest, his account of the story of Jacob, or of Saul, or of Elijah and the prophets. Sometimes he made his studies of the latter more general. A great attraction to his mind was the prophetic psychology: what the visions of the prophets amounted to, and in what subjective states the possession of the Word of the Lord consisted. To such phenomena—whether normal or morbid—he returned again and again; and made excursions into the New Testament to examine the phases of “prophecy” described by Paul in the Corinthian church. It is an obscure atmosphere, and he of all men was least tempted to speak dogmatically about it. Yet one would fain hope that, among his papers, lectures on the subject may be found to complete the relevant fragments which he has already published.

Davidson's interest, however, was never exhausted by the

¹⁹ He was one of the most influential of the Old Testament Revision Committee which issued the English Revised Version.

²⁰ Compare also his introduction to Nahum, in the *Cambridge Bible for Schools*.

subjective phenomena of Israel's religion. Their objective origin and goal was to him the fundamental and supreme duty of the expositor. He once said to me that "the prophets were terribly one-idea'd men"—the idea being that "Jehovah had done or was going to do something;" and he frequently asserted that the message of the whole Old Testament might be summed in one word—God. There any skepticism he had stopped short. In concluding a review of a field on which his temper was perhaps most at home—the book of Ecclesiastes—he uses the following words:²¹ "God and his moral rule, however obscure its incidence may be, and the moral life of man, are sure. When our Lord said, 'God is a spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in spirit,' he not only stated a necessity, he gave a definition. The human spirit is an ethical subject, and has fellowship with God, in whose image it is made. And this fellowship is independent of outward circumstances. But, though in moments of lofty faith the Hebrew saints attained to this feeling, *nevertheless I am continually with thee*, they could not sustain themselves in it. But he who has this fellowship no longer feels that God is outside of him, crushing his spirit with iron fetters; he is with God at the center of the universe, and can say to himself, 'All things are yours.' He has already all things under his feet." To Davidson the value of the Old Testament lay in its many exemplifications of this fellowship. Prophecy was a revelation; he really never treated it in any other aspect; and he was loyal to his belief in ways that few know. For instance, because he considered—whether rightly we need not now inquire—that the terms of Lord Gifford's will excluded revealed religion, he refused the honor of the Gifford lectureship at St. Andrews.²² He would not interpret the religion of Israel except as revealed. The divine pursuit in the Old Testament absorbed his heart. Past all formulas and con-

²¹ *Theological Review*, Vol. III, p. 20.

²² Lord Gifford, one of the judges of the supreme court in Scotland, left funds to endow a lectureship in natural theology at each of the four Scottish universities. The lectureship is given for two years, and is worth from £400 to £500 a year. Among others, Max Müller, Edward and John Caird, Pfeiderer, Fairbairn, Sayce, Professors Royce and James of Harvard, have been Gifford lecturers.

ventions, past dogmatic faith and experimental doubt, his aim was to reach the living God. And thither he led his students also. A more powerful guide to God few of us have known.

It must not be supposed, however, from what has been said of the personal foci on which his mind concentrated, that he made no attempt to collect and to grade the general doctrines of the Old Testament. His students in the seventies remember two courses of lectures—on “The Doctrine of Sin,” in which he made some answer to the late Principal Tulloch; and on “The Teaching of the Old Testament upon the Future Life.” Besides a few scattered paragraphs in his reviews, and his introduction to Ezekiel, there are his articles on “God in the Old Testament,” and “Prophecy and Prophets,” contributed to Hastings’s *Dictionary of the Bible*; and we are waiting with expectation to know whether he left ready for the press any part of that Old Testament theology which he was preparing.

Another of our master’s charms was his poetic feeling. That so good a schoolmaster, so exact a grammarian, had also the poet’s mind is a surprising fact, considering the rarity of the combination. Strangers to him will understand how it added to our enthusiasm. Those who were under him from 1875 to 1877 had a peculiar opportunity for feeling it. In one of these years he organized a voluntary class in preparation for the Semitic fellowship, which Dr. John Mure opened to the Scottish graduates.²³ The subjects set were Syriac, a number of Old Testament books in Hebrew, and Renan’s *General History of the Semitic Languages*. Davidson took us for Syriac grammar and translation on Friday afternoons at his house, and from 9 to 10 two other days of the week on Canticles and Ecclesiastes. Apart from his lectures on Jacob, Saul, Elijah, and the prophets, I think we had him at his best in these poetical readings. The sun surely did not shine every morning of that Edinburgh winter, and Davidson’s room lay in the shadow of other buildings. Yet I am unable to think of that room, when we eight or ten gathered to read Hebrew poetry with him, except as filled with sunshine. Those were the most radiant hours of all our

²³ It was of the annual value of £100. It did much to extend Semitic studies in

student years; and to this day we cannot open certain pages of our Hebrew Bibles without that face above the desk being visible over them, and that sunshine falling athwart the verses. The uncouthness of the oriental language was for us, once for all, dissolved. We were in the heart of a great literature and a great life. To the interpretation of Canticles he brought not only the fragrance of the Syrian spring—I affirm I felt the magic as much in that Edinburgh class-room as afterward on Esdraelon itself—but the kindred airs of many other poetries, both of East and West; while he let his skepticism and his humor play full upon Ecclesiastes. “Our hearts remember how!”

I have not contributed to these pages anything of his humor.²⁴ The recent notices of him have given the public a number of sayings more or less authentic; but such a “spate” of them utterly misrepresents the fine reserve and rare aptness with which he used his wit. Nothing, perhaps, was more significant of his mastery of his subject than the fashion in which these easy, unpremeditated, unexpected, never-repeated odds and ends of humor flashed out on us; while nothing more firmly proved the possession he had of our minds than our acceptance, without resentment or rankling, of his caustic and pitiless criticisms. He sometimes drew blood, but the wound was for good—clean, sharp, and washed with humor. We felt even a paradoxical sense of honor when some of our suggestions drew the same scorn as we saw him pour on certain theories identified with venerable names. His contributions to the *Theological Review* show how he never hesitated to turn his rapier, on just occasion, against the greatest of contemporary scholars; but on the printed page one misses the curious blush that flushed his face so often as he let his scorn break out in a lecture. Once this was over he was as before, the same shy scholar, eager to draw his pupils’ opinions, and respectful to the views of the humblest interpreter of Scripture. You thought you had caught at last the real, imperious spirit of the man, but it escaped you. In this, too, he was elusive.

To return to ourselves—work that was honest, however poor,

²⁴ For instances see an article by the late PROFESSOR BRUCE in the BIBLICAL

he never blamed; but no man dared in his class to be slovenly, or florid, or pretentious, more than once. His moral, like his intellectual, discipline was very severe.

Dr. Davidson was as great a preacher as he was a teacher. He preached seldom, and only in obscure little churches. Whenever we got the clue, we students went to hear him. It is said that he had not more than twelve or fifteen sermons—"Jacob," "Saul," "Elijah," "Psalm 51" and other psalms, "The Rich Young Ruler," "*It is Finished*," some leading verses in Romans (especially the argument in the ninth chapter), and some passages in Revelation. It is twenty years since I heard him, but I remember these texts and the general bearing and emphasis of each sermon. He read; very quietly, but occasionally grew impassioned, and then his voice rose shrill on the Aberdeen accent. To hear him was a profound religious experience.²⁵

His prayers, both in the pulpit and at his desk in opening his class, his students never can forget. They were expressed in very simple language, full of Bible phrases; but you felt that a great, meek, wistful soul was speaking with God, and he drew you near to God.

It is my fault if these recollections of Dr. Davidson's teaching do not make it clear why so many of his students so easily dropped the older views of prophecy and of the Bible in which they had been brought up. When the new way was opened to us by such a man, is it wonderful that our passage should be so easy; that so trenchant and so radiant a personal influence should exceed all the force of orthodox tradition; or that so religious an inspiration should render harmless to our faith the rupture with habits of mind formed by associations so many and so sacred? It was, in truth, one man against an ancient and an honored system; and the fact that his students so easily and so painlessly left the latter is the final proof of the greatness of his qualities, of the confidence he bred in us, of the strength of his intellectual discipline, of the charm and wealth of his instruction, of the soundness and infectiveness of his piety. He never attacked the older views. He had neither scorn nor impatience for them. He thought that others spoke "with unnecessary

²⁵ The sermon on "Jacob" is published in the *Expositor* for March, 1902.

force of past methods of handling and conceiving of Scripture as 'uncritical and irrational.' " He compared these methods with God's wise accommodation of his revelation to men, as in different ages and with different conditions they needed it and were able to receive it. "Has not," he asked, "the same wise providence that dispensed the revelation presided in some sense also over the interpretation of it? Do not the age and the method always harmonize? Would a former time have been able to 'receive' the methods of the present one?" A critic "may urge the living to gird up their loins to what he considers their new and great task, but he may silently leave the dead to bury their dead."²⁶

IV. LAST YEARS.

There is little need to linger on the later years. Successive generations of students proved what their predecessors discovered. Nothing new emerged, except that they gave him the singularly infelicitous name of Rabbi. No borrowed title, this least of all, suited one who was so different from all his kind. Being just himself, his own simple name "Davidson" was, and is, the best to call him by. His fame and influence constantly increased. After the death of Robertson Smith, he was the one man who represented the Semitic scholarship of Scotland to other schools and countries. Honors fell thick upon him. He had been a member of the Old Testament Revision Committee. He was the first scholar outside the Church of England to contribute to the *Cambridge Bible for Schools*. No general work in his own department has been begun in Great Britain in recent years without his advice, and almost none carried out without his help or inspiration. Our greatest biblical scholars have almost unanimously looked up to him as one greater than themselves. I have heard (outside his own pupils) Driver, Sanday, Ryle, Gore, James Robertson, Flint, Hastie, Kennedy, Briggs, Francis Brown, and many others praise him in superlatives. Had he gone to America he would have taken you by storm; there was no man on this side whom Drummond, or Stalker, or myself, was oftener questioned about.

²⁶ *Theological Review*, Vol. III, p. 63. Then follow some wise remarks on the relation of preaching to criticism.

Of university honors he had (besides the degrees of doctor of divinity and doctor of laws in his earlier years, and the offer of the Gifford lectureship already mentioned) the rank of doctor of letters in Cambridge University, and that of doctor of divinity from Glasgow at its fourth centenary in 1901, when he received it, to his great satisfaction, along with Briggs, Francis Brown, Cheyne, and Driver.

Age enhanced, if possible, his loveliness, but did not diminish the features already described as so paradoxical in his character. He remained to the end as solitary and as elusive. One might spend ten years asking him to preach: he was always coming and he never came. He avoided the moderator's chair to which his church called him. On one or two occasions on which he appeared in public he spoke as if all his professional work had been vain, except for the love it had gained him from his students. For years two of what would have been his greatest works were advertised, but he died without completing them. Nor did he grow more fixed about the things he had always held in solution. In one of his reviews he seems to hint that, if a scholar does grow more certain in his opinions, he becomes less able to stimulate the mind of others.²⁷ He quotes with sympathy the views of more positive scholars, that the new criticism can be brought into the sphere of Christian thought and made serviceable to Christian life; that to do this is "to disarm the giant and dedicate his weapons to the house of our God; we may find, when a new pinch comes, that we can use his sword, and that 'there is none like it.'"²⁸ Yet he committed himself to few of the new positions and was always careful to present them to the minds of his students in equal balance with the old. These things were more or less indifferent to him. His heart was below them in fellowship with God through the revealed word; and this, won as we saw through struggle in his youth, and sustained through all the critical movement which coincided with his career as a teacher, was his chief influence and his highest example to his generation.

²⁷ *Theological Review*, Vol. III, p. 117.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 62, 63.